

# **AI Tools in Society: Impacts on Cognitive Offloading and the Future of Critical Thinking**

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## **Abstract**

The proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI) tools has transformed numerous aspects of daily life, yet its impact on critical thinking remains underexplored. This study investigates the relationship between AI tool usage and critical thinking skills, focusing on cognitive offloading as a mediating factor. Utilising a mixed-method approach, we conducted surveys and in-depth interviews with 666 participants across diverse age groups and educational backgrounds. Quantitative data were analysed using ANOVA and correlation analysis, while qualitative insights were obtained through thematic analysis of interview transcripts. The findings revealed a significant negative correlation between frequent AI tool usage and critical thinking abilities, mediated by increased cognitive offloading. Younger participants exhibited higher dependence on AI tools and lower critical thinking scores compared to older participants. Furthermore, higher educational attainment was associated with better critical thinking skills, regardless of AI usage. These results highlight the potential cognitive costs of AI tool reliance, emphasising the need for educational strategies that promote critical engagement with AI technologies. This study contributes to the growing discourse on AI's cognitive implications, offering practical recommendations for mitigating its adverse effects on critical thinking. The findings underscore the importance of fostering critical thinking in an AI-driven world, making this research essential reading for educators, policymakers, and technologists.